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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: MARKING THE AUGUST 7 ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY
OF THE WAR

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¶1. (U) Summary: Georgians commemorated the one-year anniversary of the August 2008 conflict with numerous events around the country, including a mid-day visit by President Saakashvili to a cemetery containing the bodies of soldiers killed in the war, a nationwide moment of silence at 3 pm, an open-air "occupation museum" on Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue depicting centuries of Russian aggression, and an official ceremony led by President Saakashvili at Gori Castle in honor of those killed last summer, that included representatives of the diplomatic corps. Samagrela Governor Gorozia opened the Ganmakhuri Pioneer camp, located near the Abkhaz administrative boundary line, with little national fanfare. On the eve of the anniversary, the GoG released a report offering an historical overview of Georgian-Russian antagonism beginning with fall of the Soviet Union through last August's war. The mood in Tbilisi was subdued with events taking place in a somber atmosphere under gray skies. End Summary.

GOG RELEASES REPORT ON AUGUST 2008 CONFLICT

¶2. (U) Minister for Reintegration Temuri Yakobashvili released a report on the August 2008 war with Russia on the eve of the one-year anniversary of the conflict. Published in Georgian and English, the 80-page report entitled, "The Aggression by the Russian Federation Against Georgia," offers the GoG's broad historical overview of Georgian-Russian antagonism beginning with fall of the Soviet Union. Part of the report's contents parallels the information the GoG provided to the Heidi Tagliavini Commission (see reftel), which is investigating the causes of the August conflict. Yakobashvili presented the report on August 6, 2009, to members of the diplomatic community, the press, civil society, academia, and the public; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense were also in attendance. The presentation included actual Russian missile parts recovered from the war, videos showing scenes of the conflict, and posters illustrating a chronology of events. Yakobashvili commented that although Russia still issues "alarming statements," Georgia is now in the international spotlight, which "enables us to deter Russia's aggression and not to allow reoccurrence of the bloodshed that our country passed through last August."

DIFFERING VIEWS OF THE SAME STORY

¶3. (U) The parties to the conflict continue to deflect blame for igniting hostilities last summer. On August 6, 2009, President Saakashvili published an Op-Ed in the Washington Post entitled, "Georgia, On the Rebound," in which he states that "Russia's 58th Army crossed over Georgia's internationally recognized borders," beginning "a long-planned invasion aimed at toppling my government and increasing Moscow's control over our region." In contrast, in an article entitled, "The West's Moral Failure over

Georgia," featured in the August 6, 2009, issue of the Guardian, de facto Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokoity assert that "(t)he truth is that on 7 August 2008 an irrational Georgian leader used US military support to launch a brutal attack on South Ossetia, hours after publicly assuring Ossetian civilians that he had ordered a ceasefire....only Russian intervention prevented an even greater atrocity."

14. (U) In Tbilisi, Maestro TV aired an anti-Saakashvili segment that claimed that the President had signed a "capitulation treaty" under which Georgia lost more villages in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian control after the war. Imedi TV aired a lengthy interview with Saakashvili on Qvar. Imedi TV aired a lengthy interview with Saakashvili on August 6, 2009, in which the President admitted, "yes, Russia has taken over several dozen villages... but Russia's eventual goal was full annihilation of Georgia." He stated that the Georgian army could have resisted the Russian invasion and protected areas that eventually came under Russian control, but "that would have meant destruction of the Georgian army and there would have been no one to protect Tbilisi." "Those saying that Georgia launched the war are a marginalized group of politicians in Georgia," he added.

OPPOSITION ATTENDS NSC MEETING

15. (SBU) The National Security Council (NSC) met on the eve of the conflict's anniversary to discuss external threats and Russian aggression. President Saakashvili also used the NSC session as an opportunity to address opposition leaders' concerns about attacks on their activists by inviting several opposition leaders to attend; Irakli Iasania (Our Georgia-Free Democrats), Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (Freedom Party), Zurab Tkemaladze (Industrialists Party), Akaki Asatiani (Traditionalists), Petre Mamradze (Fair Georgia -

the party of former PM Noghaideli), and Bachuki Kardava (National Democratic Party) of the non-parliamentary opposition and MPs Paata Davitaia (We Ourselves), Levan Vepkhvadze (Christian Democrats), and Gia Tortladze (Democratic Party) of the parliamentary opposition accepted the invitation. A separate meeting between opposition leaders and law enforcement authorities to discuss these attacks has been set for August 12, 2009.

EVENTS IN GORI AND TBILISI MARK ANNIVERSARY

16. (U) Georgians marked the anniversary of the war with numerous events around the country, particularly in Gori and Tbilisi. Commemorations in Gori reportedly began at midnight August 7 with the lighting of "bonfires of unity." Bonfires were lit in other cities around the country with the goal of being seen by those in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi was closed for the duration of the day and transformed into an "occupation museum." According to organizers, the "museum" or "street theater" features Soviet military equipment and other exhibits portraying "two centuries of Russian aggression" against Georgia beginning in 1783 with the signing of the Georgievsk Treaty, which made eastern Georgia a protectorate of the Russian empire. Samagrelo Governor Zaza Gorozia opened the Ganmarkhuri Pioneer camp for several hundred IDP children. The camp, located near the Abkhazia administrative boundary line on the northern side of the Enguri River, was destroyed in the August 2008 conflict. There was no media coverage of the event in Tbilisi.

REMEMBERING THOSE WHO DIED

17. (SBU) At 3 pm on August 7, 2009, a nationwide moment of silence was held in honor of those killed in last year's war. Embassy employees participated in this event. In addition, senior GoG officials will gather in Gori to lay the foundation for a monument depicting the names of victims of the war. At 8:30 pm at Gori Castle, President Saakashvili is scheduled to attend a ceremony commemorating those killed last August. Ambassador Tefft and other members of the

diplomatic corps will attend.
TEFFT